

Trinity

2023

I take as my text today the Collect for Trinity Sunday:

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hast given unto us thy servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity; We beseech thee that thou wouldest keep us stedfast in this faith, and evermore defend us from all adversities....

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.

Today, we are celebrating the *Feast of the Holy Trinity* closely associated with St. Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury who was consecrated bishop on **Trinity Sunday** in 1162 and, as Archbishop of Canterbury directed its observance throughout the realm. It was and still today remains as a celebration that is peculiarly **Anglican**.

And, while we Anglicans continue to number the Sundays from Trinity until Advent as *Sundays after Trinity*, both the Episcopal Church and Roman Church now number the Sundays following Pentecost until Advent as *Sundays after Pentecost*, or as *Ordinary Time*.

In a tradition that typically reflects our English religious heritage, the liturgical calendar is divided into two periods: **Advent to Pentecost** during which we observe the historical Christ, and **Trinity** up to, and including, the **Sunday before Advent** as a period of instruction on our *Catholic Faith*.

Last Sunday, *Pentecost*, we discussed the Holy Spirit as the third Person of the Godhead. Our focus was on God as **Divine Love**, not only that God **IS** Love but that it is **Divine Love** that binds the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as three Persons in one Nature — inseparable yet distinguishable — and it is that **Divine Love** which binds us and all of his Creation to him.

Now, in our Gospel passage appointed for *Trinity Sunday*, St. John turns our attention to the **Sacrament of Baptism** and the concept of *to be born again*, the theme that runs through this Gospel passage, a *rebirth*, better yet a *new birth*. It is a spiritual death and a spiritual rebirth — dying to sin and rising up to a new life as a Christian.

This spiritual rebirth is consummated through the **Sacrament of Baptism**: the outward and visible sign being the pouring of water over the person baptized with the words, *I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost*, and the inward and spiritual grace: *A death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness... we are made children of grace*.

Baptism under the **New Covenant** was not to be symbolic but, rather, an essential act through which we *become* **Christians**.

With this introduction, we now to **Trinity Sunday**, the focus of which is the revelation of the **Triune Godhead**, which can be demonstrated effectively through the **Sacraments of the Church**, and we have a lot to cover in a short time.

Beginning with **Baptism**, each **Sacrament of the Church** is predicated upon God acting through his three revealed natures: the Father, who created us and loves us as His children; the Son, Jesus Christ, who has redeemed us by his Blood; and the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who dwells within us, who sanctifies us, and whose operation completes each Sacrament.

While the Epistle and Gospel appointed for this Sunday are more closely associated with **Pentecost**, the Collect brings home a truth that has challenged the **Church Fathers** and subsequent theologians since the turn of the first century — the ultimate self-revelation of God and his redemptive purposes; God revealed to us as a conscious, intelligent, purposeful life, a reality that is found in the mutual love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: the three Persons of the Godhead, distinguishable as Persons, yet indistinguishable as essence, that for the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century, such as St. Basil, was not an abstract but a concrete reality.

What we take for granted as the *Doctrine of the Trinity* was hammered out over several centuries from differing conceptions of the Godhead, many of which were declared heretical, such as **Arianism**.

As a heresy, **Arianism** taught that, in the full sense, only the Father was God and that Jesus Christ was merely a created being, a man who had been adopted into the Godhead.

This was a significant heresy concerning the Trinity which was refuted by the Council of Nicaea. Thus, we find in the Creed the phrase *being of one substance with the Father* to further define that whatever the Father is, the Son is also.

Undoubtedly, what God has revealed to us about who he is is far beyond human comprehension, yet it has been man's endeavor to study and classify God as if he were a specimen in a laboratory.

From the study of **Holy Scripture**, we find that God is One while at the same time three Persons. That is the mystery of the **Holy Trinity**: the Unity of the Trinity, three persons co-equal in all things, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

*The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and yet they are not three Gods, but one God....*co-equal yet one God; co-eternal; of one substance. There is no time when God was not; there is no beginning and there is no end.

This is the *Doctrine of the Trinity*. This is the doctrine taught by the **Church** and proven by **Holy Scripture**. It is a mystery beyond our human reason to comprehend, only to accept.

This is a lot to take in. We human beings are partly spiritual and partly physical, that is to say there is an innate spiritual element of our being deep within us. This we Christians acknowledge.

But first, in our journey of Faith, we must accept that God is spirit and has no bodily form. We cannot touch him with our hands or see him with our eyes.

Moreover, God is **Self-existent**, that is, God is without creation and from all eternity while **we** are his Creation. He has no beginning nor ending; he **Is**. With God, there is no past nor future but an eternal present.

God is **Holy**, that is, he is the essence of Goodness. It is that *Goodness* that enables us to love and obey him.

God is **Almighty, Omnipotent**, all powerful, in that he can do whatever he pleases, except sin. He cannot sin because he is perfect.

God is **Omnipresent**, that is, he is in everything, in all and through all, and from him nothing is hid.

God is **Love**; Love is the very being of God. As God never changes, so he is and has ever been love.

Accepting that God is love, infinite love, is essential; it is basic to accepting that he is not, and never was, alone. From all eternity he is **three Persons in one God**. This we can accept knowing that love needs an object upon which to spend itself. If God were *solitary*, he would be imperfect.

But God is **perfect**; therefore, within God perfect love exists in the divine society of the **Trinity**. It is this revelation that God is Love that prepares the reason or mind for the revelation of the mystery of the **Holy Trinity**.

The question at this point is not do we understand all this, but do we accept the mystery of the **Holy Trinity**?

One of the difficulties, even a stumbling block, in accepting God's Self-revelation is our own language.

As an example, in the context of the Trinity, the word **Person** does not mean **Individual**. It comes from a Latin translation of the Greek *hypostasis* which meant, essentially, **distinctions**, translated into Latin as **Persona** and used in a technical sense but not to mean **individual**.

Another word, or concept, is **homoousian**, translated from the Greek as **substance** or **essence** and highly debated in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries. We see it in the **Creed** as Jesus Christ is one **substance** with the Father.

There was tremendous debate, reflected in the writings of those three centuries and in reports from the ecumenical councils, in particular the **Council of Nicaea** in 325, resulting in the **Nicene Creed**, and then at the **Synod of Alexandria** in 362, sorting out the issues related to the Incarnation.

The evidence from Scripture concerning the nature of the Godhead led to the **Trinitarian** definition but the way had to be cleared of any misconceptions to avoid theism, or multiple Gods instead of one God.

What may have been perfectly clear to the Apostles, when expressed through the languages used in writing the Gospels and Epistles, became for those who followed a veritable mystery to be sorted out. The clues were there in the Scriptures but how to express it; how to avoid heresies that would be inevitable during a process that would take several centuries.

As one can surmise, those **Church Fathers** and early theologians had much difficulty in seeking the proper language to express what has been revealed of the Godhead through Scripture, just as we have today with English, in fully expressing the exact meaning of the original Greek and the Latin translations.

Now, by no means is this a comprehensive look at the *Doctrine of the Holy Trinity*, perhaps, though, a fair beginning, an introduction to a doctrine that is not contrary to reason but beyond human reason to comprehend.

One of the comforts of accepting the **Trinity** is the revealing through it of the perfect-ness of God's **Love**, the wonderfulness of his **Love**, not just within the Godhead, but in and through all of his Creation, as expressed so emphatically in the sending of Jesus Christ, God the Son, to be a propitiation for the sins of the world, and to be our Advocate with the Father; and in the sending of God the Holy Spirit to be our Comforter and Guide.

Thus, through Scripture and the defining of the Faith through the Church Councils, we may find rest, assured by that Faith that we are baptized into the family of God in the Name of the **Trinity**, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; we are blessed throughout our lives in the Name of the **Trinity**, of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and when we are called home, we are received lovingly by the **Holy Trinity**, our Heavenly Father who created us, Jesus Christ his Son who redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us.